

## **Candidate's Night Ambulance Presentation**

Comments by Joel Uchenick  
Topsfield FinCom

The Board of Selectmen has chosen to put two articles on the warrant for a town-owned, operated and managed, fee-for-service ambulance service. Two override articles associated with this service would also have to pass at the ballot for this to happen. The costs for this service in year 1 would be about \$110,000 for staffing - and this is for only half of the year - and \$170,000 for the purchase of two new ambulances for a total year 1 cost of \$280,000, after deducting reimbursements by medical insurers. The Selectmen had appointed a committee to study the desirability and feasibility of a town-owned system. That committee, consisting of dedicated and competent individuals, decided to present the facts, as they understood them but made no recommendation as to whether the town should proceed. The Selectmen, however, endorsed the proposal. Then, it became the job of the FinCom to evaluate the proposal and determine whether or not to recommend this project to the town.

The FinCom had numerous meetings with the Selectmen and with the committee appointed by the Selectmen. We, of course, received substantial input from the Fire Chief. In addition, we have read the key pieces of medical research on emergency medicine. Because we are talking about so much money we wanted to be confident of our grounding.

The FinCom unanimously voted to recommend no action on this

proposal for five reasons: 1) the existing system with Lyons Ambulance works quite well for the relatively modest cost of about \$50,000 per year. The study committee appointed by the Selectmen, in fact, observed exactly this.

2) Medical need. We know from the research recommended to us by the Committee that the key to saving lives is how quickly a defibrillator can arrive at the scene of a medical emergency. The FinCom has always supported defibrillators in Topsfield for the Police and Fire first responders. Topsfield's first responders are all so equipped. Who owns the ambulance that eventually transports someone needing assistance to the hospital is not related to medical outcomes.

3) Finances: The amount of money involved in this proposal is substantial for a small town like Topsfield, especially when compared with the current cost of about \$50,000 for Lyons. Of course, if we thought that lives could be saved, we would recommend the article and the override. But we are convinced that this is not the case. The key concern raised by the Fire Chief was the difficulty of recruiting call firefighters/first responders during the daytime and weekends. To address this, the FinCom has recommended increasing the fire department budget by \$80,000 in order to provide adequate staffing. Note, however, that the Fire Chief would continue to want this \$80,000 whether the Town goes into the ambulance business or not.

4) Management. I'd also like to point out that the Town's ability to

manage a complex undertaking such as this could be seriously questioned. In fact, the Town is hiring a Town Manager but that won't happen for a couple of years. After that happens we can reassess the issue of management, but until then, we should not overburden the Fire Department with the difficulty of doubling its size, taking on the burdens of Lyons Ambulance Service, and all the other difficulties and complexities of managing this proposal. Adding to it at this time would be unwise. There is no question about the quality of the Fire Department's service. They simply have had a difficult time in managing estimated call numbers and thus their required budget. To more than double the budget from three to eight full-time firefighters and their responsibilities, we believe, is inviting trouble.

5) Risk. There are many of us who believe that this proposal puts the town at risk and starts us down a financial road of no return. The first risk is disconnecting from a system that works to experiment with an untried system with questionable staffing. To be specific, under the new proposal the firehouse would be staffed with two firefighters at any time. When the ambulance with two fire fighters is making a run to the hospital, who, then, would be left in town to handle a fire or medical emergency? Having made this major increase in the fire department staffing, equipment and budget, the first time an ambulance is making a run while another emergency arises, we will be asked for more staffing and budget to make the system work. Together these issues will likely lead in future years to the need for even

more personnel in the Fire Department and additional costs to the taxpayers.

So, for the reasons that I have mentioned – the adequacy of the existing system as demonstrated by the experience of the Town and the most current medical research, the excessive costs, the problems of managing such a project and the risks to the safety and the long-range financial well-being of the Town – the FinCom urges you to vote no on the warrant articles relating to the ambulance service and the additional personnel it would require.